

The Magic of Cinema: (Re)Unifying Creativity, Art and Magic Through Kenneth Anger's *Lucifer Rising*

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Introduction

Making a movie is casting a spell.¹

In a secular world dominated by science, rationality and empirical evidence, the realm of the esoteric and occult is immediately classified as being subaltern and irrational; relegated to the world of make believe along with UFOs, the Loch Ness Monster, and the fairies at the bottom of the garden. An even more contemptuous suggestion to the logical Enlightened mind is the claim that art itself is a form of magical praxis with the power to affect, change, and shape the everyday world in which we live. This conceptual union of art and magic is, however, the foundation of the work of American filmmaker Kenneth Anger (b. 1927). In describing the objective of his creative work, Anger states that “making a movie is casting a spell”, claiming that he seeks to directly affect the realities of his audience through magic.² Lauded as one of the most influential filmmakers of the New American Cinema, Anger's work functions as an artistic magical ritual, fusing esoteric spirituality with experimental cinema to produce a new form of cinematic magical practice.³

This article will examine Anger's final film, *Lucifer Rising* (1972), in an attempt to challenge traditional understandings of art and magic by reunifying the supposedly disparate concepts in its claim that art, as a form of magic, can and does affect real world change.⁴ In order to do so, this article will problematise and expand the definition of magic, and also the

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¹ Kenneth Anger, cited in Ethan Doyle White, ‘Lucifer Over Luxor: Archaeology, Egyptology, and Occultism in Kenneth Anger's Magick Lantern Cycle’, *Present Pasts*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2016), p. 1.

² Anger, cited in Doyle White, ‘Lucifer Over Luxor’, p. 1.

³ Doyle White, ‘Lucifer Over Luxor’, p. 1.

⁴ *Lucifer Rising*, dir. Kenneth Anger (London: BFI, 2011 [1972]), DVD.

understanding of how real world change can be understood. Drawing from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that there are as many worlds and ways to affect it as there are embodied experiences of it, this article will additionally argue that the most important element of this process is the viewer's individual subjective response to a piece of creative work.⁵ As a result of this, the concept of *affective real world change* becomes localised in the phenomenological experience.

Firstly, this article will begin by offering a brief summary of Anger's film and its antecedents in Thelemic belief and praxis. It will then locate its discussion of the film in the magical universe by examining the problematics of the terms 'esotericism' and 'magic'. The article will then reconsider the concepts of art and magic collectively, defining them together as a force of affective creative power as a means of exploring Anger's film, *Lucifer Rising*. Finally, in addition to its phenomenological approach, the article will conclude with an exploration of the impact of Anger's work in sociocultural discourse as an alternative example of how it affects real world change. Ultimately it will suggest that artworks such as *Lucifer Rising* wield a force of affective creative power on both a spiritual and secular level and thus have the ability to impact both the individual and collective sociocultural realities of its audience.

Practical Magick: The Influence of Aleister Crowley and Thelema⁶

Anger's body of work is simultaneously characterised by its occult content and its pioneering exploration of cinematic technique. This is most significantly realised in a series of eight short films shot between 1947 and 1981. This series, collectively titled *The Magick Lantern Cycle*, is fundamentally concerned with the affectation of ritual magic through the creative force of cinema.⁷ The culmination of this series is its final film, *Lucifer Rising* (1972). Described by Gary Lachman as Anger's magnum opus, the film is simultaneously a magical artefact and a significant example of American experimental cinema.⁸

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Donald A. Landes, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 6.

⁶ Because Crowley preferred to spell magic with a 'k', this article will use both the traditional and Thelemic spelling.

⁷ *Kenneth Anger: Magick Lantern Cycle* (London: BFI, 2011), DVD.

⁸ Gary Lachman, 'The Crowned and Conquering Child', in the booklet accompanying *Kenneth Anger: Magick Lantern Cycle* (London: BFI, 2011), DVD, p. 5.

According to Anger, *Lucifer Rising* is both a cinematic ritual invocation of and a homage to his personal deity, Lucifer.⁹ Crucially, as an adherent of Thelema, the figure of Lucifer is not equated with evil or Satan but with the Egyptian deity, Horus.¹⁰ Founded by the British occultist Aleister Crowley in 1904, Thelema is a syncretic fusion of Eastern and Western esoteric traditions such as Kabbalah, Hermeticism, Egyptian mysticism, and Tantra.¹¹ Sensationally described as a form of “therapeutic blasphemy”, Thelemic belief and praxis sought to overcome heteronormative nineteenth century discourses of spirituality and sexuality through an extreme transgression of social boundary and taboo. This was affected through a variety of ‘left handed,’ or subversive magical rituals which fused Western magic with Eastern concepts of the energetic body. Crowley advocated that adherents “do one’s pleasure on the earth among the legions of the living” with rituals specifically involving sexual practices which were considered deviant or perverted in nineteenth century discourse.¹² Adherents of Thelema thus ascribe to the tenet of ‘Do what thou wilt’ and thus spiritual development is conceived to be the liberation of the individual will of the subject above all else.¹³

This belief is presented in the tradition’s central text, *The Book of the Law* (1906), which Crowley claimed was dictated to him by his guardian angel Aiwass in a series of visions in Cairo in 1904.¹⁴ These visions were outlined in a series of statements or laws which proclaimed the coming of a new age of human consciousness, the aeon of Horus, in which the will of the individual would be freed from the oppression of the matriarchal and patriarchal aeons of Isis and Osiris.¹⁵ As an adherent of the Freudian belief that repression of the sexual instinct was the principle cause

⁹ Judith Noble, ‘The Light Behind The Lens: The Occult Cinema of Kenneth Anger’, *Abraxas*, no. 2 (2014), p. 57.

¹⁰ Noble, ‘The Light Behind The Lens’, p. 58.

¹¹ The term derives from the Greek *theleme*, meaning ‘will’.

¹² Aleister Crowley in Gordan Djurdjevic, ‘Solve et Coagula: Attitudes toward the Ambrosial Aspects of Human Seed in Certain Yogic Traditions and in the Sexual Magick of Aleister Crowley’, *Aries*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2010), p. 98.

¹³ Aleister Crowley, ‘The Book of the Law’, in Chas S. Clifton and Graham Harvey (eds), *The Paganism Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 70.

¹⁴ Crowley, ‘The Book of the Law,’ *The Paganism Reader*, p. 68.

¹⁵ Hugh B. Urban, ‘The Beast with Two Backs: Aleister Crowley, Sex Magic and the Exhaustion of Modernity’, *Nova Religio*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2004), p. 17.

of psychological distress, Crowley claimed in his self-described hagiography that “the violent turmoil of the modern world lies in the repression of the sexual instinct.”¹⁶ Crowley thus considered normative discourses of guilt and shame to be ‘servile’ and instead conceived the liberation of the individual sexual subject to be at the centre of the Thelemic project, stating, “the surest way to solve our contemporary problems lies in its (sexual) liberation.”¹⁷ According to Crowley, this liberation was to be affected through the frenzy of sexual magic ritual in which the rational and inhibited mind would be dissolved and swept away by the “swirling tides of the unconscious.”¹⁸ The sexual individual was thus conceived to be the essential truth of existence with the male orgasm posited as the “supreme mystery of practical Magick.”¹⁹ According to Hugh Urban, Crowley considered the ‘Law of Thelema’ to be the means by which society could transcend not only the “servile superstition” of Christianity but also the failed ideologies of politics with Crowley stating, “the law of Thelema avows and justifies selfishness; it confirms the innermost conviction that man is the centre of the cosmos.”²⁰

Crowley thus considered Thelema to be the basis for a new social order which valorised selfishness, human nature, and the “satisfaction of true aspiration.”²¹ Central to the realisation of this aeon of Horus was the magical power of the erotic subject and its deployment in ritual. Crowley attempted to fully realise this ‘utopian’ vision between 1920 and 1922 by creating a community in Sicily, Italy, known as at the Abbey of Thelema.²² During this period the ‘Law of Thelema’ was lived to its extremes with members gratifying their impulses by freely experimenting in “drugs, sex and physical excess.”²³ This theology and praxis distinctively posits the embodied experience of the sexual being as a manifestation of the divine.

Drawing from this Thelemic mythology, Anger thus envisages Lucifer as the Egyptian deity Horus and in the true sense of his name, not

¹⁶ Cited in Urban, ‘The Beast with Two Backs’, pp. 11-12.

¹⁷ Richard Cavendish, *The Black Arts* (New York: Tarcher Perigree, 2017), p. 133; Crowley, cited in Urban, ‘The Beast with Two Backs’, pp. 11-12.

¹⁸ Cavendish, *The Black Arts*, p. 133.

¹⁹ Cavendish, *The Black Arts*, p. 238.

²⁰ Urban, ‘The Beast with Two Backs’, p. 17.

²¹ Cited in Urban, ‘The Beast with Two Backs’, p. 17.

²² Urban, ‘The Beast with Two Backs’, p. 13.

²³ Urban, ‘The Beast with Two Backs’, p. 10.

as a devil but as the morning star and bringer of light.²⁴ This belief is fully realised in his final film, *Lucifer Rising*. The film cycles through three distinct phases which move through the primordial state, the ancient aeons of Isis and Osiris, and the climactic summoning of Lucifer with the ritual performed by Anger himself. A close examination of the film suggests that every image has been specifically chosen or constructed for its occult content and that every aspect of the film making process “conveys magical meaning.”²⁵ It can also be understood however, to be a pioneering work of experimental and underground cinema. According to Judith Noble, because of the complex nature of Anger’s magical creative practice, his work has been dismissed by both critics and magical practitioners. That is to say, the secular art world accepts the occult nature of Anger’s film without engaging with it while the magical world overlooks it due to it being a non-traditional medium of magical praxis.²⁶ As Noble suggests, this dismissal is deeply problematic as it fails to recognise Anger’s important contribution to both cinematic and magical praxis.²⁷ In addition to this, it can be further suggested that Anger’s fusion of esoteric magical praxis with experimental cinema represents a significant challenge to existing sociocultural understandings of the seemingly disparate categories of art and magic.

***Māyā*: A Conceptual Reunification of Art and Magic in Esoteric and Creative Praxis**

The realm of esotericism and the concept of magic are central to an investigation into *Lucifer Rising*’s affective agency as a form of cinematic magic. Both terms are inherently heterogenous and are therefore deeply contested. Crucially, they are also fundamental elements of Anger’s creative praxis. Popularised at the beginning of the nineteenth century by groups such as the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, in common parlance the term ‘esoteric’ refers to a variety of beliefs and practices which pursue an alternative or obscured understanding of human spirituality that is available to the select few. Crucially, these esoteric groups legitimised their traditions by claiming that their spiritual teachings had originated in the ancient past. Therefore, esoteric discourse is

²⁴ Elio Gelmini (dir), *Anger Me* (London: BFI, 2011 [2006]).

²⁵ Noble, ‘The Light Behind The Lens’, p. 59.

²⁶ Noble, ‘The Light Behind The Lens’, p. 49.

²⁷ Noble, ‘The Light Behind The Lens’, p. 49.

characterised by a deployment of a *prisca theologia*, or unifying theology, which connects the contemporary tradition to its mythical and arcane antecedent. In such a broad definition the term can thus be applied to any great number of spiritual practices, from the Gnostic sects of antiquity to contemporary Neopagan worship of the deity Baphomet. In light of this cultural conflation, the term esotericism has become so semantically overdetermined in popular culture that the meaning of the word has become “inflated and permeated” by misconception.²⁸ As Antoine Faivre posits, rather than being a specific genre, esotericism should be considered to be a form of thought.²⁹ In addition to this, Faivre suggests that esotericism can be characterised by six fundamental elements: *correspondences*, that the universe is comprised of interrelated visible and invisible elements with the part (microcosm) a reflection of the whole (macrocosm); *living nature*, that the natural world is imbued with agency and vital life force; *imagination and meditation*, the reliance on ritual and theurgic practice, as well as symbolic images and mandalas; *experience of transmutation*, spiritual transcendence through the attainment of divine wisdom; *concordance*, the attempt to unify the variety of esoteric belief and praxis into one single understanding; and finally *transmission*, the passing down of said occult knowledge from teacher to pupil.³⁰

Following on from Faivre’s criteria, it becomes apparent that the concept of ‘magic’ and its praxis is central to esoteric thought. It too is an incredibly problematic term however, with the word being used to describe anything from a sunset to a serendipitous encounter, an emotion or sensation, or anything else that defies belief.³¹ This sentiment is echoed in Ariel Gucklich’s observation that contemporary understandings of the term have become a “decadent hodge podge of ideas from many sources”, with it being used so extensively that its meaning has been exhausted: “We use the word magic so often that it means too much, and therefore hardly anything.”³² Central to these contemporary disenchanted usages is the absence of magic in its spiritual sense, as a form of agency or affective

²⁸ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 4.

²⁹ Faivre, *Access To Western Esotericism*, p. 10.

³⁰ Faivre, *Access To Western Esotericism*, pp. 10-15.

³¹ Susan Greenwood, *The Nature of Magic: An Anthropology of Consciousness* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p. 6.

³² Ariel Glucklich, *The End of Magic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 7.

force. In light of these problematics, scholars of Western Esotericism have attempted to define magic in its true sense. For example, John Middleton defines magic as “an act with the intention to bring about certain events or conditions”, while Glucklich suggests that magic is “an extraordinary power that derives from seemingly supernatural sources.”³³ The magical act is thus characterised by ritual action such as the recitation of spells or the manipulation of materials, and the relationship between the cause and effect is understood to be outside of empirical scientific reason.³⁴ Crucially, in both Middleton and Glucklich’s definitions, religion or spiritual tradition is noticeably absent, while on the other hand, Elizabeth M. Butler suggests that magic is indelibly tied to some form of religion.³⁵ Although all three definitions do justice to the spiritual and supernatural elements of magical practice, they fail to recognise the affective power of creative practice as a form of magic.

Drawing from the Hindu concept of *māyā*, this article will build upon these working definitions of magic and seek to (re)unify it with the creative power of artistic praxis. Although the conceptual unification of the two terms seems problematic in a Western secular context, the conflation is fundamental to other cultures and spiritual practices. For example, this concept is most significantly demonstrated in the Sanskrit term *māyā*, which simultaneously refers to not only magic and art but also to illusion, imagination, and creative power. Therefore, both magic and art can be simultaneously understood to be a form of symbolic expression, which seek to deploy an affective creative force. In Western secular societies however, the concepts of art and magic are distinct. This separation was the result of emerging sociocultural and philosophical discourses of the Enlightenment which privileged logic over faith and empirical scientific data over superstition.³⁶ As James Frazer suggests, it can be argued that magic is a form of “proto-science”, offering an explanation for phenomena that is beyond scientific understanding.³⁷ Crucially, as Susan Greenwood suggests, the sphere of reason was privileged over that of magic and it therefore came

³³ See Glucklich, *The End of Magic*, p. 8.

³⁴ Glucklich, *The End of Magic*, p. 8.

³⁵ Elizabeth M. Butler, *Ritual Magic* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), p. ix.

³⁶ Glucklich, *The End Of Magic*, p. 7.

³⁷ James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*, Volume 1 (New York and London: MacMillan and Co., 1894), p. 15.

to master “the inferior sphere of nature.”³⁸ Up until this point, creative practice in the West was used as a means of depicting and thus expressing the mystical or divine experience. For example, the icon was understood in Catholic worship not only as a depiction of the divine, but also as a means of immersing the viewer in the embodied experience of it.³⁹ In this circumstance, the benefits of a combined understanding of and art magic as a force of affective and creative power becomes apparent. Therefore the conceptual reunification of the two terms has become a significant project in both modern and contemporary creative practice. For example, during the late nineteenth century a form of Occult Theatre emerged as not only a challenge to orthodox religion but also as a response to hegemonic sociocultural discourses of science and reason. These practitioners privileged spiritual practice and expression over doctrine and dogma, and thus conceived art to be the fundamental means to connect human beings with the divine.⁴⁰ As Edmund B. Ligan suggests, theatre was regarded by esoteric practitioners simultaneously as being a tool of expression while also as a means of sharing alternative spiritual practice with a wider audience.⁴¹ As a result of this, the theatre was considered to be a form of sacred art as it produced a ritual like space, which had the potential to “spiritually transform human beings.”⁴² It can thus be argued that the Occult Theatre of the nineteenth century is a clear antecedent of Anger’s cinematic magical praxis and that in this instance, the role of the shaman or priestess has converged with that of the creative agent.

While magic in this instance is deployed in the religious or spiritual sense, it is also crucial to recognise it as a secular sociocultural discursive phenomenon. For example, as well as being considered as a magical artefact, Anger’s film can also be understood to be an exemplar of experimental film which simultaneously pushes the boundaries of its medium and culture. Anger’s cinematic language fuses viscerally charged homoerotic dream sequences, with occult symbolism and pop culture references. By deploying illusion, dreaming, and fantasy in the liminal space, modalities of creativity such as Anger’s are able to depict otherwise abnormal or abject realities, such as esoteric spiritual practice or homosexual subjectivities. Therefore, the

³⁸ Greenwood, *The Nature of Magic*, p. 2.

³⁹ Douglas Ezzy, *Sex Death and Witchcraft: A Contemporary Pagan Festival* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 51.

⁴⁰ Edmund B. Ligan, *The Theatre of the Occult Revival: Alternative Spiritual Performance from 1875 to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 1.

⁴¹ Ligan, *The Theatre of the Occult Revival*, p. 1.

⁴² Ligan, *The Theatre of the Occult Revival*, pp. 1-2.

creative work is able to transgress and therefore challenge boundaries of social taboo or normality. Magic, in this sense, is the affective force of creative power against hegemony. In this regard, creative magic can be understood to be a form of what Michel Foucault terms “reverse discourse”, in which marginalised or abject communities reaffirm their identity and thus assert their agency through a reclamation of language or depiction in sociocultural discourse.⁴³ Therefore, by expanding the definition of the creative affective force of magic to include both esoteric and subcultural artistic practice, the term is able to encompass both the spiritual and secular understandings of the term.

Evidence of the Senses: Approaching Magic from an Agnostic and Phenomenological Perspective

Despite this conceptual unification of art and magic, it would appear that the fundamental issue to this discussion remains. That is the question of the empirical reality of magic. Described by Glucklich as “the scholar’s hangout”, this question plagues academic discourse in its frustratingly persistent resort of relativism and cultural perception.⁴⁴ As Douglas Ezzy suggests, the academic problematising of empirical reality is often mistaken for the denial of its existence, which subsequently lends itself to an atheistic methodology.⁴⁵ In this case, the task of the academic becomes conflated with the issue of proving whether something is or is not real. As a result of this, any attempt to prove or disprove the embodied spiritual experience of magical practice is to miss the point entirely. That is to say, the efficacy of *Lucifer Rising* is not dictated by whether the film actually summons the Devil. Lucifer does not have to physically appear during a screening of the film; if Anger believes his work to be a ritual invocation of Lucifer, then it is. It is crucial to recognise that it is not the scholar’s task to prove or disprove such phenomena, but is rather to examine the social processes through which these subjective realities are created.⁴⁶ As Ezzy suggests, “ethnographers should treat spiritual encounters

⁴³ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 101.

⁴⁴ Glucklich, *The End Of Magic*, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Douglas Ezzy, ‘Religious Ethnography: Practicing the Witch’s Craft’, in Jenny Blain, Douglas Ezzy, and Graham Harvey (eds) *Researching Paganisms* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), p. 122.

⁴⁶ Ezzy, ‘Religious Ethnography’, p. 122.

and realities as genuine social experiences with social antecedents and socio consequences.”⁴⁷

As a result of this, the issue pertaining to the definition of real world affectation then becomes a question of the individual embodied experience. This concept of the embodied experience of spirituality is central to esoteric praxis, which privileges feeling over faith. According to Jeffery Alexander, this valuing of the somatic over the semantic engenders “a sensual experience that transmits meaning”, or what he terms “iconic consciousness.”⁴⁸ As a result of this “evidence of the senses rather than the mind”, the normal relationship between the signifier, signified, and viewer is disrupted with the human experience posited as the locus of meaning.⁴⁹ This follows on from Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “we will never understand what a visual field is by beginning from the world”; that the unquestioned belief in the world as singular and true object is erroneous.⁵⁰ That is to say, an understanding of what the world is and the reality of it is built upon individual embodied experiences. Crucially, as Merleau-Ponty points out, these vastly different phenomenological experiences are understood in their “own private context”, and therefore seem “as if they did not belong to the same universe.”⁵¹ Therefore, rather than deploying a scientific and atheistic methodology, this article will approach its discussion from a phenomenological perspective. Following on from this claim, it will now examine *Lucifer Rising* as both a magical artefact and as an experimental film. As result of this, it will argue that the film deploys a magical force on both a spiritual and secular level rendering it a significant example of the affective force of creative power.

Lucifer Risen: Anger’s Film as Magical Artefact

Anger’s use of medium can affect its viewer on both a spiritual and secular level. Crucially this is achieved through his simultaneous extension of magical praxis and his manipulation of filmic technique. Anger uses the medium as a means of extending upon esoteric correspondences, therefore creating his own form of cinematic magical praxis. As Faivre observes, the Law of Correspondences is a uniting and malleable force between the natural and

⁴⁷ Ezzy, ‘Religious Ethnography’, p. 124.

⁴⁸ Jeffery Alexander, ‘Iconic Consciousness: The Material Feeling of Meaning’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 26, no. 5 (2008), p. 782.

⁴⁹ Alexander, ‘Iconic Consciousness’, p. 782.

⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty and Landes, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 6.

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty and Landes, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 6.

celestial words and is therefore crucial to esoteric thought.⁵² Anger's film utilises a vast array of Thelemic correspondences such as colours, images, and symbols as a means of deploying an affective force to invoke Lucifer. Crucially, Crowley had developed these correspondences out of the ritual magic of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which was in turn a syncretic fusion of various esoteric beliefs and practices, combining elements of Egyptian mythology with Kabbalah and Rosicrucianism. For example, the image of the crocodile is repeated throughout the beginning of the film. In the primordial stages a close up shot shows a baby crocodile slowly emerging from its shell, while other wider shots depict huge crocodiles swimming in a flowing river. This is a direct reference to Crowley's Tarot of Thoth, which depicts the The Fool standing upon a crocodile. According to Crowley, "The whole picture is a glyph of the creative light."⁵³ Traditionally numbered as 0 in the Tarot, The Fool is simultaneously associated with new beginnings and transcendence, symbolising both the beginning and end of the journey through the Kabbalistic Tree Of Life towards the highest path of the Sephiroth of Kether (Supreme Crown).⁵⁴

According to Richard Cavendish the crocodile can also represent the lowest Sephiroth of the Tree of Life, Malkuth (Kingdom).⁵⁵ It can therefore be inferred that Anger extends upon these correspondences, conceiving Lucifer, as being both the beginning and the end of human experience. In addition to this, Anger's deployment of esoteric correspondences can also be seen in his use of colour. As Lachman suggests, Anger's shifts and choices of colour may seem arbitrary, but they are in fact grounded in a strict form of Hermetic, Alchemical, and Kabbalistic magic.⁵⁶ For example, at the climax of the invocation, the camera cuts to reveal a man dressed in a black silk bomber jacket with the name 'Lucifer' emblazoned on its back. Underneath each letter is a panel of colour emanating from a glittering golden pentagram, forming a rainbow. This image is simultaneously a magical symbol for the light of divine wisdom from Lucifer, the morning star, and the culmination of the journey through the twenty-two paths of the Tree of Life, which is symbolised by a rainbow.⁵⁷ However, the image is imbued with pop cultural agency as it is not a traditional magical garment such as a robe but is a fashionable item of

⁵² Faivre, *Access To Western Esotericism*, p. 29.

⁵³ Aleister Crowley, *The Book of Thoth* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1969), p. 69.

⁵⁴ Cavendish, *The Black Arts*, p. 97; Noble, 'The Light Behind The Lens', p. 59.

⁵⁵ Cavendish, *The Black Arts*, p. 98.

⁵⁶ Lachman, 'The Crowned and Conquering Child', p. 8.

⁵⁷ Cavendish, *The Black Arts*, p. 98.

clothing. It can therefore be suggested that through his use of filmic correspondences, Anger develops his own magical creative practice and thus extends upon existing magical praxis and the Law of Correspondences.

Selling the Beast: *Lucifer Rising* as a Form of Secular Magic

However, this esoteric interpretation of *Lucifer Rising* limits its affective agency to only the initiated magical practitioner. Crucially, the creative affective magical force of Anger's film can also be understood on a secular level though his use of subliminal filmic technique as means of physically affecting the senses of the viewer. Anger's manipulation of light, sound, and imagery are deployed as a means of affecting the viewer's perception and thus inducing altered states of consciousness. Although Anger's use of effects, such as flash frames, jump cuts, and subliminal messaging, has been dismissed as "pure psychedelia" by critics, Ethan Doyle White suggests that this was part of the larger 1960s counter cultural utopian project which sought to revolutionise Western society by transforming the individual consciousness through artistic means.⁵⁸ For example, Anger's film can be understood as an attempt to introduce Crowley to the 1960s counter culture. After the climatic invocation of Lucifer, the camera begins to move through a claustrophobic but ornate library. In the centre of the wall is a red cloth with an inverted black pentagram. A figure then removes the cloth to unveil a portrait of Crowley. As the music begins to build ominously the camera pans backwards and forwards with Anger deploying several jump cuts as a means of disorientating the viewer's perception. The camera swings like a pendulum forcing the viewer's gaze to land each time onto the portrait of Crowley. Although Anger uses several symbolic references to Crowley (such as the image of Pan copulating with a goat, a reference to Crowley's poem, *Hymn To Pan*), Anger uses two flash frames of Crowley's image, one a close up of his eyes and the second in magical regalia, to subliminally transpose the figure of Crowley into the mind of the viewer. This is a clear example of Anger realising his creative desire to "project images directly into people's heads."⁵⁹ As a result of this, Anger circumvents the rational mind or "Cartesian frontal framework" of the viewer and instead permeates into the subconscious.⁶⁰ Anger thus describes his work as being a type of spell which has the intention to transport its viewer into a trance experience.⁶¹ Even though pop cultural figures such as Mick Jagger,

⁵⁸ Matthew Hughes, cited in Doyle White, 'Lucifer Over Luxor', p. 1.

⁵⁹ Lachman, 'The Crowned and Conquering Child', p. 12.

⁶⁰ Lachman, 'The Crowned and Conquering Child', p. 12.

⁶¹ Gelmini, *Anger Me*.

Jimmy Page, and David Bowie were experimenting with esoteric practice, it was Anger who introduced them to the figure of Crowley. As Lachman suggests: "If any one deserves credit for introducing Crowley into the youth culture pantheon, Anger does."⁶² In fact, this objective was explicitly stated by Anger during an interview in 1971, in his admission that, "I have one product that I'm selling; the 20th century's most misunderstood genius, called Aleister Crowley."⁶³

As a result of this, Anger's creative magical practice can be understood to be an extension of what Judith Butler terms the creative power of "constitutive instabilities."⁶⁴ That is to say, through the repetition and reiteration of these correspondences in traditional esoteric practice, "gaps and fissures", are opened up as a means of redefining the very nature of magic itself.⁶⁵ In this regard, *Lucifer Rising* can be understood to be a new form of both spiritual and secular magic, which is deployed through the medium of cinema. In addition to this, its manipulation of cinematic technique to subliminally affect the perception of the viewer can also be understood as a significant example of the affective force of creative power. As a result, *Lucifer Rising* can be understood as a new form of magical praxis which deploys an affective force of creative power on both a spiritual and secular plane. Although having access to the esoteric symbolism used in Anger's work can offer an enriched experience of the work, it is not limited to it. Lachman observes: "as Anger well knows, magic works best when its influence is felt unconsciously."⁶⁶ It can thus be suggested that *Lucifer Rising* is a significant example of a form of contemporary magic, in which modalities of artistic practice have been co-opted by the creative magician as a means of impacting the viewer on both a spiritual and secular level, reunifying the concepts of art and magic into a singular form of affective creative power.

Lucifer Rising, Liminality, and Counter Cultural Communitas

The question remains, however: Even if *Lucifer Rising* is understood to be an example of affective creative power on an individual level, how does this individual impact change the world on a wider scale? As previously suggested, the philosophical concept of a real world can be a matter of individual phenomenological perception and subjectivity, with there being as many real

⁶² Lachman, 'The Crowned and Conquering Child', p. 8.

⁶³ Anger, cited in Lehman, 'The Crowned and Conquering Child', p. 8.

⁶⁴ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 10.

⁶⁵ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 10.

⁶⁶ Lachman 'The Crowned and Conquering Child', p. 12.

worlds as there are viewers. However, a more concrete exploration of this issue can be found in a discussion of the film's creation of a liminal space and its status as a ritual. According to sociologist Victor Turner, liminal ritual practice is deployed by social groups as a means of dealing with and redressing a form of crisis.⁶⁷ Central to Turner's model of Social Drama is the concept of liminal space, a form of "fructile chaos" in which ritual participants are said to experience a form of social anti structure which is "betwixt and between", and outside of everyday time and space.⁶⁸ As a result of this liminality, the ritual process offers social groups an opportunity to reaffirm their collective identity through its creation of what Turner terms *communitas*.⁶⁹ Therefore, according to Turner, the ritual cultivates a profound sense of meaning, with the significance of ritual practice described by Tom. E. Driver as being a deep human longing, which is, in our secular culture, "often frustrated".⁷⁰ Even though Turner's model explicitly deals with physical embodied ritual, his analysis is problematic as it approaches the impact of ritual on a cognitive level rather than from a phenomenological perspective. However, when this conceptual framework is applied to Anger's film *Lucifer Rising*, further questions arise. Is the efficacy of a ritual bound to its cultivation of a physical liminal space, or is it possible for a ritual to cultivate an affective liminal space, which is outside of embodied experience? That is to say, can a film be embodied, or conversely does a ritual need to be physically experienced in order to be effective? Given our contemporary culture's penchant for vicarious living through screens could this be the future of religious or spiritual praxis in the digital age?

Crucially, in Turner's model, the symbolic and semantic is privileged over the somatic embodied experience. It can be suggested, however, that Anger's film exceeds this model in its use of cinematic technology to simultaneously document and disseminate magical ritual, effectively creating its own form of counter cultural *communitas*. For example, Anger used the physical screenings of his films as an opportunity for his audience to engage with his work as a collective experience of liminal magical ritual. At a Spring

⁶⁷ Victor Turner, 'Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology', *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), pp. 9-11.

⁶⁸ Victor Turner, 'Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, And Drama?', in Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (eds), *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 11.

⁶⁹ Turner, 'Liminal to Liminoid', pp. 9-11.

⁷⁰ Tom E. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), p. 1.

Equinox event in 1967, Anger incorporated a screening of his film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954) into the ritual, instructing his audience on when to take the psychedelic drug LSD. In addition to this, at another screening of the film in 1958 in Brussels, Anger had the film projected onto three screens, superimposing images over each other as a means of collectively enveloping his audience into the work, creating what he termed “polyvision.”⁷¹ Further evidence of Anger’s creation of a subcultural *communitas* and its impact upon the real world can be seen in his representation of LGBTQI identities and non-normative sexual subcultures. For example, although it is subtle, *Lucifer Rising* is suffused with male homosexual erotica. As the film builds towards its climax, a muscular semi-naked male reclines in a throne. The camera cuts to reveal him wielding a javelin of light and then jump cuts to another shot of him naked and covered in blood, walking towards a bath. Crucially for Anger, this concern with the homosexual erotic aesthetic was absent from not only subcultural cinema but also from homosexual cultural representations of its own sexuality. Anger describes his use of allusion and suggestion as being a fully realised form of erotica which is diametrically opposed to what he describes as “the vulgar in out” of pornography.⁷² Therefore Anger’s work simultaneously reclaims the pejorative and culturally constructed categories of sexual deviancy and devil worship and wields them as form of reverse discourse against normative cultural representations that posit homosexuality and the esoteric as taboo and subaltern.⁷³ As a result of this, Anger’s films had a significant impact on the cultural legitimacy of LGBTQI identities and non-normative sexual subcultures, with the sexologist Dr Alfred Kinsey requesting a copy of *Fireworks* (1947) for his Sex Research archives.⁷⁴ Anger’s work thus becomes an audio-visual ritual of sight and sound which impacts upon the world in concrete ways, not only affecting the individual viewer but also cultivating a type of subcultural creative *communitas*.

Conclusion

This article used an examination of Kenneth Anger’s *Lucifer Rising* to challenge Western secular understandings of art and magic, reunifying the concepts and arguing that art, as a form of magic, can, and does, affect real world change. Crucially, this was pursued through a phenomenological

⁷¹ Gelmini, *Anger Me*.

⁷² Gelmini, *Anger Me*.

⁷³ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, p. 101; Glücklich, *The End Of Magic*, p. 7.

⁷⁴ Gelmini, *Anger Me*.

approach to the question of real world change, and by problematising and expanding the definition of magic in both a spiritual and secular sense. Firstly, the article offered a summary of Anger's film and its antecedents in Aleister Crowley's Thelema. It then located the film in the problematic discourses of esotericism and magic, defining magic and art collectively as a force of affective creative power. It then suggested that *Lucifer Rising* is a new form of cinematic magical practice through an investigation of its antecedents in Thelemic belief and praxis, Anger's use of medium, and its status as a ritual artefact. Finally, it concluded with an examination of the impact of Anger's film in sociocultural discourse as a concrete example of its affecting real world change.

In an expanded version of this article, the concept of somatic faith would be further explored through ethnographic research with artists, theatre makers, and magical practitioners, as well as a creative example offered through the author's own creative performance and magical praxis. In addition to this, the concept of Lucifer in Anger's work would be further explored, with the suggestion that all artists are, in one way or another, transgressive light bearers for their culture. Even though Anger's creative work is grounded in esoteric magical practice, an appreciation of the film is not limited to an understanding of it. In the same way that we do not need to be a Christian to marvel at the beauty and ecstasy of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, we do not need to revel in the fire of Lucifer's demonic light to be dazzled by the psychedelic brilliance and affective power of Anger's film.